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Quintilian says (1.12.17), 'I do not care for anyone even to read my book who is going to calculate how much money his studies will bring him'.

As a classicist in this age of crass commercialism, I find a warm spot in my heart for the old Roman grammarian Valerius Probus. Finding copies of the works of Plautus and others of the most ancient Latin authors, the memory of whom had been entirely obliterated at Rome, he began to read and reread them diligently, and then to search for other copies. Finally, with no other inducement than his love for his work, he devoted his life to the emendation and the annotation of these old and despised authors, though he realized full well that they were *magis opprobrio legentibus quam gloriae et fructui*²⁰.

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DE REGE ET RUSTICA

Characters: King Alfred (A.); Rustica, a peasant woman (R.); a soldier (M.).

Scene: the kitchen of a herdsman's cottage in England, about 871 A. D. The herdsman's wife is discovered tending her fire, and sweeping the hearth.

R.—Semper cineres in foco; cotidie lapidem rado, sed cotidie pulvis venit. (*She fetches a board from the table at the left, on which are some little puts of dough ready to be baked*). Veni, panis parve; inter cineres caldus eris! (*She puts one among the ashes. A knock is heard; she puts the board back on the table, and looks towards the door, hesitating fearfully*). Quis est? Tot hostes in vicinia sunt ut ianuam aperire timeam. (*The knock is repeated more insistently; going reluctantly to the door, she opens it, and retreats hastily to the far side of the room. Enter A.*).

R.—Quis es?

A.—Indigens sum, sine amicis, sine patria. (*He is evidently distraught*).

R.—Quidnam vis? Nos quoque pauperes sumus.

A.—Requiescere paucas horas hac in coquina mihi liceat, et tecum vesperi cenare.

R.—Sane. Sed cena nostra pauper est: hodie panem modo habebimus. Sed libenter panem tecum dividemus.

A.—Gratias ago.

R.—In hac sella considere, et panes parvos quos in cineres imponam tuere. Prohibe eos flagrare. (*She bustles around, putting the cakes into the ashes*). Ad maritum ibo, nam fortasse ad cenam caseum et carnem emere poterit. Noli pati parvos panes flagrare! (*As she says the last words, she puts on her hooded cape,*

and goes out, leaving the King sitting by the fire, and watching the cakes. Presently, he becomes absent-minded, rises from his chair, and walks up and down).

A.—Quid faciam? Rex sine corona sum. Exercitus meus pulsus est, et barbari ad portas ipsas Londini adsunt. Milites mei, rege amisso, dispersi fugiunt. Me miserum! Cur Deus me regem fecit? (*After walking up and down a moment more, wringing his hands in silence, he sits down on the chair, but with his back to the fire; he straddles the chair, and drops his head on his arms. After a while, he ejaculates the following disjointed sentences*). Homo timidus et ignavus sum; regno non sum dignus. Ei mihi, quid faciam? (*He sits sunk in despair, his head still on his arms. Rustica, entering, sniffs the air, then rushes to the fireplace, and rakes out the charred cakes*).

R.—Flagrare, ingrate, panes passus es! (*She shows them, all burnt and spoiled, to him*). Stulte, improbe, inepte! (*She shakes her finger in his face*). Nulla cena hic hodie vesceris. Nihil vel ego vel tu vel maritus meus edet. (*She turns to the fireplace, crying, and wiping her eyes on her apron*).

A.—Eheu! ignosce mihi, oblitus sum. (*She ignores him. He turns away with a gesture of despair*). Perniciem ubique mecum traho. Odiosus deo sum. Utinam me mors vincat. (*A knock is heard; then a soldier enters hurriedly, and kneels beside the King. Rustica turns round in astonishment*).

M.—Salve, rex nobilissime. Tempore opportunissimo te invenio, namque Roberti exercitus ducis de septentrionibus auxilio nobis venit.

A.—Deus sit laudatus!

M.—Multi milites iam in castris se congregant et te exspectant.

A.—(*inspired*). Venio. Fortuna non semper est adversa. Nunc secundam se monstrat, et auxilium eius, deae mutabilis, maximo cum gaudio accipimus.

R.—(*She has been standing transfixed by the hearth, but now runs forward, and kneels beside the King, plucking his mantle timidly. But the king hastens to get his cap, which he had left by the door, and his cloak, which he put on the table. As he passes the soldier, he says, in a tone of command, Veni, and motions with his head towards the door. Then he sees Rustica, still kneeling, and lifts her up as she finishes the following speech*). Mei, rex clementissime, miserere, mihi parce. Te non cognovi; mihi ignosce.

A.—(*smiling, as he lifts her up*)—Verba tua merui, panem enim destrui. De castris aliquid mittam ut edatis. Flagrati panis obliviscere; regem modo quem adiuvisi memoria tene. Nunc vale; ad exercitum ibo, ut victoriam petam. (*He lifts his hand in a gesture of farewell, and goes to the door, which the soldier is holding open. As he goes out, he turns again, and waves his hand to Rustica*).

R.—(*looking ecstatically at the hand by which the King had lifted her from her knees*) Haec manus regem tangebant! Hi oculi regem videbant! Etiamsi nullam cenam habeo, beata sum!

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²⁰Suetonius, De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus 24.

²¹Reference may be made to two papers on Quintilian, An Ancient Schoolmaster's Message to Present-Day Teachers, by Charles E. Bennett, in The Classical Journal 4.149-164, and Quintilian. The Schoolmaster, by Gordon J. Laing, in The Classical Journal 15.515-534.